

# The COMLA Connection

An interview between MICHAEL WOOLISCROFT (Regional Councillor, COMLA South Pacific Region) and JOHN STRINGLEMAN (former COMLA President)

[The aims of COMLA (the Commonwealth Library Association) are to support and encourage library associations in the Commonwealth; to forge, maintain and strengthen professional links between librarians; to promote the status and education of librarians and the reciprocal recognition of qualifications in librarianship; to improve libraries; and to initiate research projects designed to promote library provision and to further technical development of libraries in the Commonwealth.]

**MW:** John, the New Zealand Library Association has been a member of COMLA for some years now. Can you remember how and when the Association came to join the Commonwealth Library Association?

**JS:** Yes, that occurred in 1971, and the approach was actually from the Commonwealth Foundation, which was the parent body of all the Commonwealth professional associations. The Commonwealth Foundation wrote to area library associations throughout the Commonwealth asking if they would like to send representatives to a meeting in London, at the Foundation's expense, to consider the possibility of forming an association of library associations under the umbrella of the Commonwealth Foundation. The NZLA readily agreed to take part in this meeting, and I was asked to represent them at the 1971 London meeting which followed closely on the Liverpool IFLA Conference. That meeting extended over several days, with secretarial support from the Library Association and on its premises. About 20 Commonwealth library associations were represented, and they agreed that we should pursue the idea of forming a professional association. The next step was to call an inaugural meeting of representatives of the then existing library associations in the Commonwealth in Nigeria in 1972.

**MW:** You say that 20 library associations agreed to join; have all of them maintained their membership?

**JS:** From memory only one membership has lapsed, and that was Malaysia. Otherwise, all the founding members have retained their membership, and of course many more members have been added over the years, up to 50 or so.

**MW:** The Association has been in existence for 17 years; what do you think are its major achievements?

**JS:** The major achievements have been the seminars which have always been organised to tie in with the meetings, either Executive or full Council meetings. And closer links between the association have been quite effective in that most members of COMLA now know far more about their fellow members than they did originally. There has been a broadening of our horizons. Perhaps not so much

in the Pacific area, but in other parts of the world, certainly in Africa and the Caribbean, there has been much closer association between the member countries than there was formerly. There are only 3 or 4 members in the European region and yet some very worthwhile things have been done in that area, one of them being the passing of the Cyprus Library Act. Probably we failed in the Pacific because of the vast distances that separate us; the cost of travel between the Pacific member countries is a big factor. Several of the members, particularly in the Pacific region, are tiny countries with only one or two librarians. It is difficult for these people to get the backing to go to meetings, and communication is a problem: even airmail takes weeks to reach them in many cases.

**MW:** The links between associations you speak of as being an important benefit of COMLA I suspect have benefited some more than others. When I visited the Canadian Library Association offices I found them quite disenchanted with the benefits of being a member of COMLA. They also had in mind the twinning of the New Zealand Library Association with the Canadian Library Association, which has so far produced nothing more than a piece of paper. I think that's another piece of evidence of the difficulty of trying to develop meaningful relationships with associations that are so far apart. I wonder whether links between the associations are more profitable where there are small countries relatively closely contiguous?

**JS:** Yes, I think that's right, it's much easier in an area like the Caribbean where countries are fairly close together and meet regularly under one hat or another. ACURIL, for instance, the Association of Caribbean University, Research and Institute Libraries — they meet annually, and this is an opportunity for COMLA members to get together. It's easy for some of the African countries, not so much the West African group, a bit of a disappointment in terms of COMLA support, but the Eastern, Central and Southern African Countries frequently get together, and have been able to do this because of regular area meetings that are well established. I think, too, it's harder for, say, Australian and New Zealand members of their library associations to accept that they are the donors rather than the recipients of benefits in an organisation like COMLA, and it is the developing countries who stand to gain the most. I don't know quite how to counter the query that so often arises about COMLA and similar organisations, "What's in it for us?"

**MW:** Well, this interview should play a part in advertising what might be our donor role. But have there been any benefits for the New Zealand Library



Association over the seventeen years of our membership?

JS: No really tangible ones in terms of, say, grants or scholarships, but some quite worthwhile publications have come out under COMLA sponsorship, and though they probably relate more to activities in developing countries they should, I think, be of considerable interest to students of library science.

MW: So if New Zealand's role has been largely one of giving rather than getting, what have we given in seventeen years?

JS: There's not a lot, I feel, that we have given, and it's quite possibly my fault that this is so. I haven't put the pressure on the NZLA as perhaps I could have done. I know that there are other associations in the developed countries which have poured quite a lot into COMLA, and of course the Library Association is the prime example of this. There is terrific support from them in so many ways that I doubt whether COMLA could have survived without it. But then the LA is a vast organisation with a very Commonwealth orientated outlook, and it's not difficult for them to make the gestures that they have through the years. That's not to detract from what they have done: they have at least recognised that they are in a sense the leaders of the Commonwealth, and that is true still. Where COMLA has really flourished was under people like the first president of COMLA, K. C. Harrison. Then, when COMLA was in a bit of strife over its secretariat, he stepped in readily and happily, and for a period of 18 months or more acted as Honorary Executive Secretary with no pay at all. It was in those days that I felt that COMLA really came alive. But to get back to your original question, "What has the NZLA done in a donor role?", the answer must be, "Not a lot".

MW: John, you said that some of this may have been your fault; what would you have asked then if you felt that the NZLA Council might have been more willing to provide support?

JS: I think that there could have been opportunities to offer, in some form or another, expert assistance or advice. I don't think that the NZLA could have been expected to contribute more than it has done financially. But I think a lot more could have been done around the Pacific: the NZLA, even outside COMLA, has not got involved enough in the Pacific area.

MW: I have become more aware in recent times of the contribution the National Library makes to some of the South Pacific countries in terms of sending staff there in an advisory or a review role, and I think some stock goes to some Pacific islands. Maybe — nature abhors a vacuum — the National Library is doing what could have been done under a Commonwealth hat?

JS: That is quite true. But I think one of the problems with an organisation like COMLA is that the people who tend to get involved in these organisations are busy people anyway. I think the biggest barrier to the success of COMLA is one of communication — or lack of it. During my time as President, I tried

to improve the communications aspect. Things were simply disappearing into a black hole, in many cases. Even regular prompting or requests for answers bore no fruit whatever. If one believed all the excuses one got for not answering mail one could only presume that the whole international mail service was in absolute chaos and that nothing ever arrived anywhere. You know that this is not true, but it wasn't only the developing countries who were at fault. It was very soon evident to me that there were a handful of associations or COMLA representatives who replied immediately they got anything from either the President or the Executive Secretary; the rest usually had to be chased up and sometimes just never, never answered. This I see as being the biggest problem. I don't know how it can be overcome.

MW: You said that when Ken Harrison was Executive Secretary COMLA really reached a high point. Was it because everything operated well from the centre then, or were members responding more readily to a more vigorous Secretariat at that stage?

JS: I think it was a bit of both, but probably responding to a very vigorous secretariat was the main thing. But the centralisation of activities was a factor, because from any Commonwealth country to England, airmail at least is still excellent. You can be sure that an airmail letter will reach England in a week, most times. Now an airmail letter between New Zealand and Jamaica takes anything from 4 to 5 weeks, so that's up to ten weeks to get a reply, whereas working through London takes two weeks. That's quite an influence on the success of a secretariat based in London. Now, however, the Commonwealth Foundation in its wisdom favours secretariats based in developing countries, and I can see that there are good reasons for this. There are equally bad reasons, mainly because of communications, and I wonder whether we should be aiming to get the secretariat back to England, where not only are communications a lot better, but also there is a very strong support from the Library Association.

MW: And the LA has a huge office to provide that kind of service! I was astonished to see the size of their operation there, compared with our own very small staff. Of course, it may be outdated now to think in terms of Britain being the centre of the British Commonwealth.

JS: There is only one country in the world that would call its library association *the* Library Association. But still, they have been very supportive.

MW: Communication does seem to have been a continual problem. I guess it has been addressed at Council and Executive meetings. What has been the attitude on such occasions? Has there been any improvement?

JS: It certainly has been aired. I myself took every opportunity of airing it, and maybe this has led to some picking up, but there are still countries that have never improved. It is a peculiar fact that Nigeria, which was so keen to be the first host of a COMLA meeting, and which had such an influ-



ence on the formation of COMLA, has for years been in arrears with its subscription, and it has been practically impossible to pinpoint anyone in Nigeria who will accept the COMLA hat. I recall that at the Kenya Council meeting in 1984 a Nigerian councillor was nominated, his airfare was sent, and he never turned up. We never had a refund of the airfare and we have not been able to contact him since. It is this sort of thing we are continually battling against. In this case, without a physical visit to Nigeria by someone from COMLA, it is very difficult to establish who the contact should be. And yet, in spite of being in arrears, no doubt Nigeria still considers itself a member of COMLA. Is this a case for being tougher, and cutting them off when arrears reach a certain stage? That action has not been favoured by developing countries generally. And one of the factors generally recognised is that it is extremely difficult for some of these countries to get foreign currency to pay their subscriptions; however, those countries that have written to the COMLA Secretariat pointing out the problems have been accommodated in one way or another. There is no real excuse for ignoring the subscription requirement.

MW: It's interesting that this is a country within a close regional network. You would think that their neighbours could either help them or put some pressure on them. John, you said at the beginning that the initial approach to the NZLA to consider joining the Commonwealth Library Association came from the Commonwealth Foundation; how have relations been with the Commonwealth Foundation over this time?

JS: Extremely harmonious on the whole, with one or two hiccups, but the Foundation's role has changed a little in relation to COMLA in the seventeen years; initially it was very much the funding body. The Commonwealth Foundation is financed by government grants from the various Commonwealth countries. Each time the heads of governments meet, they fix the finances of the Foundation. They have kept up their funding, but they haven't kept pace with inflation, as in so many other situations, and it has been more and more evident over the years that the professional organisations themselves have to become more involved in raising finances for their activities. Initially there was no question that whenever there was either an Executive or a Council meeting of COMLA that the Commonwealth Foundation would find the funds. Now it is unable to do this sort of thing, so the funding has to come from the regions, or it must come from some outside source. The Canadian based IDRC (International Development Research Centre), and the CFTC (Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation) have helped COMLA in the past and no doubt will continue to do so. But the Commonwealth Foundation is itself becoming more inclined to question the activities of its professional associations in terms of funding, and to insist that such funds as it grants, apart from a modest amount for secretarial expenses, should be project based. In other words, the professional associations have to put up spe-

cific projects for funding to the Foundation, and cannot expect a handout for general purposes. There is no doubt that requests for specific projects, if properly presented, are sympathetically considered. But despite the fact that publicity about the method of seeking funds for projects is provided by the Foundation, time and time again their instructions are not followed and the cases are not properly prepared, so nothing results because the member countries haven't followed the project guidelines, which are clearly laid down. And then they feel aggrieved.

MW: Do you think this was responsible for the dissatisfaction recently expressed from Fiji?

JS: Yes, I am quite sure it was. There is no doubt that there was any amount of publicity about the way to handle requests for project funding, and the root of the problem was in Fiji's handling of it. And there have been some unrealistic expectations of funding — in other words, projects which cost 50–60 thousand dollars are just not within the reach of any of the relevant funding organisations, unless they were spread over a number of years.

MW: When I visited the Commonwealth Foundation last January, Sharon Robinson, their Projects Officer, emphasised to me that they were not prepared to fund any sort of getting together of the COMLA Executive unless it was accompanied by a workshop or seminar — something of practical benefit to the area in which the meeting was to take place, to provide a sort of cross-pollination to at least a regional grouping of Commonwealth members. Is that a somewhat changed emphasis from its initial stance?

JS: Oh, yes, definitely. I think that we have realised that what we need to do is to look for, not an isolated topic for each seminar to be mounted in association with these COMLA meetings, but a continuing theme that can carry on from one workshop to another over a period. There was in the past a big workshop on Education for Librarianship which seemed at the time to be fairly successful, and a lot of work was put into producing modules for training as librarians in the developing countries. It was circulated to member countries to try out, either the whole package or various modules, but the results were very disappointing. I can't think of any countries that really responded to this big effort. Now, however, I think that the theme of library service to rural areas, planned for the Pacific region, should be handed on, perhaps to the African countries as the theme for their next meeting, and maybe take it further. I think that this is the sort of thing that the Commonwealth Foundation would like us to be doing.

MW: Are there any bursaries or scholarships on offer that COMLA might encourage member associations to put up applicants for?

JS: Yes, there is the Pacific Commonwealth Relations Trust bursary, the brainchild of some of the British members of COMLA, who persuaded the Commonwealth Foundation Trust to offer it. It has been in existence for five years or more. Each year



librarian from a developing country in the Pacific is brought to Britain and given 3 to 6 months experience in British libraries. The European Vice-President, John Allen, has been very active in this particular activity: he sponsors the applications and prepares the itinerary for visiting librarians, and keeps an eye on them while they are in Britain. It has worked very well indeed. There is, of course, the Commonwealth Foundation Fellowship Award Scheme to promote Commonwealth understanding, which is open to all professions represented by the Commonwealth professional associations, and on two occasions librarians have been granted the Fellowship. But since it is open to all the numerous professional associations, it is unlikely that a librarian will be successful more than every few years. And there is doubt whether the Commonwealth Foundation will continue to offer it.

MW: Apart from the meetings of the Executive and the occasional Council meetings, you've indicated that letters are a rather erratic and not very reliable method of communication. How else do the COMLA members keep in touch? There's a newsletter for instance: is this useful?

JS: Yes, I'm glad you mentioned the newsletter, because I think this has been one of the most successful activities that COMLA has engaged in, and it's been fortunate that its various editors have all set a high standard. It has a lot of Commonwealth library news gleaned from member association publications, but it also has a lot of original papers directly solicited by the editor. I am aware that the Commonwealth Foundation thinks very highly of it indeed.

MW: Well, John, we have been in COMLA seventeen years now. Summing up, do you think it has been worthwhile, do you think the NZLA should remain a member, and how do you think we could contribute more effectively in the next few years?

JS: Yes, I do think it has been worthwhile, in the areas I have mentioned, but also, looking at New Zealand's point of view, in the fact that New Zealand libraries and the New Zealand Library Association are far better known round the Commonwealth than they were. I know that in my meetings in the early seventies with colleagues from other Commonwealth countries, there were some members who had literally never heard of New Zealand, let alone the NZLA or New Zealand libraries. As I mentioned earlier, we must not think in terms of what's in it for us, but more what we can do to help less fortunate COMLA colleagues. It is clear that librarians' problems throughout the Commonwealth are similar, to a greater or lesser extent; insufficient funding, inadequate staffing, dwindling resources, lack of Government recognition of the value of sound library services, are problems we all face. I believe that many developing countries can relate more readily to New Zealand than to the United Kingdom, Canada or even Australia. They see New Zealand as a country of similar size to themselves, which in terms of library service has demonstrated a practical commonsense approach to these problems. With this reputation, New Zealand

can play an important part in guiding library development in other COMLA countries, particularly in the South Pacific area. Such activity need not be a drain on NZLA funds. Expertise and advice are what is needed, as most developing countries have access to financial aid once their needs are convincingly formulated.

To sum up, I see the NZLA as a key member of COMLA somewhere between the 'haves' and the 'have nots', a member which is not expected to offer strong financial support to developing countries but certainly able to contribute in practical terms. It was done in the fifties with conspicuous success by a handful of NZLA members whose names are still revered in places like Singapore, Malaysia and Nigeria. It is unthinkable that the NZLA should cease to be a member of COMLA when it has so much to offer.

#### CODA

It appears that John Stringleman is somewhat self-effacing in giving so much credit to Ken Harrison for resuscitating COMLA at its time of low health. At that same time John generously stepped in as Treasurer, a post which, in COMLA, required a considerable secretarial/correspondence activity which John undertook assiduously. For his effort he was shortly after elected to the post of President.

Some of the dissatisfaction with COMLA expressed by Esther Williams (of the Fiji Library Association) and the staff of the Canadian Library Association office must be weighed alongside the factors involved in the internal politics of those associations.

Having now attended my first meeting of the COMLA executive, and my first regional workshop, in Sydney, on rural library services in developing countries, I am certain of the positive role of COMLA and of the need for continued and increased New Zealand input, not only at the level of the New Zealand Library Association, but also through individual libraries and librarians.

At the seminar the benefits of the programme were abundantly apparent, and the more than two dozen representatives from developing countries expressed satisfaction that the seminar, and the documentation on which it was based, provided a useful springboard for real practical developments in their own areas.

John Stringleman, in his interview, referred to the seminars as one of the major areas of achievement of COMLA, and the view was amply supported by the accomplishment of the seminar in Sydney.

In a relatively developed country, such as New Zealand, a country rich in libraries, library resources, and librarianship skills, we should be ready to offer what is regarded as appropriate by those people working in and for libraries in less developed countries. The need to avoid the paternalistic, the patronising, is ever to be borne in mind, for people in many Commonwealth countries have known the humiliating experience of expatriate librarians who have not always responded empathetically, or in a manner sympathetic to the needs, customs and values of other cultures.

But by listening carefully to what is needed we may learn what is wanted, and how it may be best offered. Initiatives will usually have to be taken by those in developing countries, but maybe if the structures are in place a useful



dialogue can begin.

New Zealand's potential contribution to COMLA will best be seen in the South West Pacific region. There can be seen to be an identifiable community in this region with a certain character, and concerns common to many.

The National Library has already been active in this region. There is every reason why the New Zealand Library Association should be alongside, assisting in the provision of better services through the sharing of resources and skills. The NZLA's modest resources are not an excuse for not contributing, or for a low level contribution. Compared with all other COMLA members in the region, and there are 9 of them, only Australia is richer. It is not so much a matter of the size of our cake, it is a matter of changing our priorities in order to share what we have with those need is even greater.

A twinning of libraries or even librarians, job exchanges, or the enabling of Pacific island librarians to travel to libraries which excel in the services they wish to provide, are just some of the ways in which New Zealand librarians can play a useful role.

Currently only five New Zealand libraries are affiliate members of COMLA, the subscription for which is quite modest. In return, members receive an excellent quarterly newsletter outlining library developments across Commonwealth countries. It is to be hoped that shortly, as more librarians are approached, this number will increase substantially.

The Commonwealth Library Association deserves our support. It is one significant way we can make a neighbourly contribution to benefit our colleagues in other countries, and the users of their services. M.W.

# The Well of Knowledge

ALAN SMITH

## I. Buildings as Means, not Ends

By the time these words appear in print in New Zealand's principal journal of librarianship, the new National Library Building in Wellington will be well past the novelty stage. This article is basically a bloodless factual record of the recent history of the project, and a definitive description of the completed structure. The Editor however asked me to add some comments derived from experience with the building and in particular on how well it suits the organisation. This was the theme of my paper to the NZLA Conference in Wellington in February 1987 so I am happy to oblige, with the proviso that this foreword does not necessarily reflect the official viewpoint of the National Library itself.

The fast-track completion between 1984 and 1987 coincided exactly with the first term of the fourth Labour Government which brought unprecedented changes to the way public services operate.

In early 1984, staff got annual, general, back-dated wage increases funded from "elsewhere"; maintenance was mostly "free" from the Ministry of Works; accommodation costs were generally the problem of the Government Office Accommodation Board; and the National Library ran as a small offshoot of Vote: Education, with many of its costs spread over other parts of Government as overheads.

Into this environment a unique, hi-tech building was launched. When the last contractors finally left, the National Library was a separate Department of State, conducting its own wage negotiations with Unions from a fixed budget; maintenance and plant renewal had to be fully funded internally; land tax and rates were being paid by the Library; and the challenge of maximising the use of the new asset was being tackled enthusiastically.

Being responsible for all the true costs of the building is a real benefit to the National Library. No longer can we shrug off the costs of energy or of space rental as someone

else's problem. If not properly managed, the building could become an expensive millstone around our necks, eating into precious bookvotes to sustain theoretical standards set in the early 1970s.

Similarly, the building could provide over-secure storage for books of marginal value that could well be housed elsewhere. If not properly managed, the building could tie up budgets in maintaining a Wellington institution rather than allowing a truly national resource to grow.

The operating costs need to be constantly compared to the \$50 million capital outlay and to the value to our nation of its recorded history. The building itself needs to generate income to contribute to the budget balance between collections, staff and overheads. The challenge of the Treaty, biculturalism, Equal Employment Opportunity, The "Greenhouse Effect" and Trans-Tasman CER may seem remote from the technicalities of the building, and yet they will all have a major impact on New Zealand's development in the coming decade. The National Library must not only match that development, but anticipate it whenever possible; its principal building has to be a prime means of enabling that change, and not be allowed to become a shackle on opportunity.

## II. The National Library Building

This account offers a technical and service description of the new Wellington headquarters building of the National Library of New Zealand (NLNZ), which was officially opened on 5 August 1987. The history of the project up to 1973 is documented in the April 1973 issue of *New Zealand Libraries* in Trevor Mowbray's article, 'Plan for National Library Building', and is not repeated here. The following covers the history of the project — the largest single library construction job in New Zealand — since 1973 and describes its architectural, physical and